

Chapter 9

Rational informative assertiveness in management communication*

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Introduction

“Assertiveness” stems from adjective “assertive” (“expressing one’s opinion in a strong and confident manner”), noun “assertion” (“the act of making a strong statement or claim”) and verb “assert” (“1. To state firmly. 2. This insist on it... defend one’s rights, opinions etc.”) (Higgleton, Sargeant, & Seaton, 1992, p. 46). In a general sense, assertiveness is self-confidence and confidence of what one says, decides or does (in various aspects and fields). Sometimes it is associated with the ability to express and pursue one’s own needs and decisions, a sense of self-competence, value, social status, self-respect, naming and expressing one’s own feelings, acceptance of criticism and praise, and with a mental attitude and a group of habits that affect the way of making decisions and actions in such a way that they are becoming more in line with what the entity intends and accepts (Lloyd, 2002; Paris & Casey, 1979; Pfeiffer & Pfeiffer, 2003, 2010; Phillips, 2002; Rakos, 1991; Robinson, 1982; Stoudenmire, 1978; Walmsley, 1991).

Nowadays, the term “assertiveness” has become a fashionable keyword in popular and scientific literature and it sometimes has been affected by the tendency of glorifying such words by narrowing the scope of “assertiveness” to mean only advantages, positive features determining personal patterns (e.g. Stoudenmire, 1978) as opposed to aggression, hatred, contempt, stupidity, etc. (e.g. Alberti & Emmons, 2001; Walmsley, 1991). This narrowing of the scope is acceptable in definitions regulating or designing – narrowing the meaning of words or conferring new meaning to words. It should be noted, however, that it is not consistent with the meaning of “assertiveness” in ordinary and scientific language, according to which, for example, one can be thoughtlessly assertive, assertively express hatred, contempt for peo-

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ple (Lloyd, 2002); assertiveness is a characteristic of actions and attitudes that may be rational or irrational (Paris & Casey, 1979; Robinson, 1982).

The purpose of the chapter is not to present a review of theories and concepts of assertiveness. The text constitutes an objective analysis. This applies to the relatively poorly scientifically examined kind of assertiveness – assertiveness in the transmission of information (hereinafter referred simply to as “informative assertiveness”) and the difference between its rational and irrational kind. The objectives are realized using the phenomenological analysis and the case study.

9.1. Rational assertion and assertiveness in the methodological sense

“Rationality” in the study indicates the feature of actions, i.e. it does not refer to for example rationality of knowledge, science, emotions or organizations. It is understood in the methodological sense (Bunge, 1987, p. 5; Kotarbiński, 1973, p. 123), i.e. it does not refer to factual (economic) rationality of actions (Hey, 1993; Kotarbiński, 1973, p. 123). Since the phenomenon of methodological rationality builds on rational assertion, it we first specify its nature.

Term “assertiveness” has a Latin etymology. Latin *asserto* and *assertio* mean assertion – a confident and forceful statement of fact or belief, that something is such and such, for example – recognizing a sentence as true or making a judgement with the conviction of its truthfulness. In antiquity, it indicated the recognition of a slave to become a free person (Kumaniecki, 1974, p. 53). In contemporary languages assertion can denote speech acts “in which something is claimed to hold” (Pagin, 2014) or a mental act of certainty about the truth of (conviction of truthfulness, subjective certainty of truthfulness) beliefs and statements expressing them. Assertion can be understood in methodological (as assigning them truthfulness or probability because of their justification), emotional (feelings about their truthfulness or likeability) or behavioural (willingness to act in accordance with them) meanings. Further parts of the study refer to assertion in the methodological sense (Bocheński, 1993; Bortolotti, 2010; Bunge, 1987).

Assertion is gradated due to its certainty – it can be stronger or weaker. The strength of methodologically rational assertion of statements is proportional to its justification. Rational certainty of information (rationality of assertions in the methodological sense) lies in the symmetry (compatibility) between justification and certainty of beliefs: the better a given claim is justified, the greater the (subjective) certainty of its truthfulness or probability. The proportion does not take place in the irrational assertion (Bortolotti, 2010; Jacko, 2013; Kotarbiński, 1973, p. 123; Pagin, 2014). For example, assertion accompanying hypotheses is methodologically rational if the entity is aware of the their justification (e.g. that they are probable

but have not been proven) and sure of them insofar as they have been justified. It is not rational if the entity is certain about them (when they have not been sufficiently proven) (Lakatos, 1980; Matheson, 2011; Popper, 1996, 2002).

Rational assertiveness (in the methodological sense) is the perpetual inclination (attitude) to rational assertion, and irrational assertiveness (in the methodological sense) – to irrational assertion. Rationally assertive persons (manifesting a tendency to rational assertion) are certain of their beliefs insofar as they are properly justified. Rational entities can maintain the beliefs even under pressure and are ready and willing to change their views when they prove wrong. The lack of rational assertiveness is a lack of willingness to rational assertion. This lack must be distinguished from irrational assertiveness, which is the tendency to irrational assertion. Irrationally assertive agents wishfully evaluate their beliefs. They can maintain beliefs contrary to their knowledge, deny direct experience, violate the laws of logic, if their knowledge, direct experience, the laws do not lead to where the methodologically irrational agents wish (Bortolotti, 2010).

9.2. Informative assertiveness

In the informative aspect, assertion is a quality of speech acts. It is about expressing certainty either verbally (e.g. using quantifiers such as “I’m sure,” “I’m not sure,” “certainly,” “perhaps,” “probably,” etc.) or non-verbally (e.g. when you confirm your own or someone else’s words, nodding, expressing certainty or its lack with intonation, mimicry or gesture). Rational informative assertion of the speech acts consists in expressing rational certainty of information. Irrational informative assertion of speech acts expresses irrational certainty (Pagin, 2014).

Informative assertion plays an informational function – it informs about the likelihood. Irrational informative assertion is a kind of misinformation. For it expresses a certainty, which is not methodologically rational. Therefore, these two kinds of assertion can play different roles in interpersonal communication. Rational informative assertion supports communication and understanding. Irrational informative assertion corrupts communication and involves a risk of misunderstanding. It can be instrumentally and objectively rational only when it is an effective tool for manipulation.

Rational informative assertiveness is a tendency to rational informative assertion of the speech acts. A person rationally assertive in the informative aspect has the ability and inclination to accurately express their methodologically rational certainty. It can manifest itself, for example, in indicating probability of information. Irrational informative assertiveness is a tendency to express informative irrational assertion of speech acts, for example, exaggerated expression of confidence (inconsistent with rational certainty) or the expression of uncertainty of beliefs in the light of their valid proof.

In the following sections one will analyse examples presenting the role of rational and irrational informative assertiveness in some typical situations of management and one will argue that rational informative assertiveness is a managerial competence. One will formulate and partially justify the following hypotheses:

- In some situations rational informative assertiveness is a necessary condition of efficient performance of managerial roles. For both leaders and ordinary employees need the ability to accurately determine the degree of certainty of their knowledge and to accurately express their certainty.
- In some situations irrational informative assertiveness cause unnecessary misunderstandings and conflicts, which contradict the objectives of management.

9.3. Rational informative assertiveness of experts and advisers

The task of experts and advisers is to suggest good solutions. Their authority does not have to be affected when they admit that there is something they are not sure about or ask for time to find the answer to the question. The expert does not need to know all the answers. He or she should only know where and how to find them (Sadler, 2001). Nevertheless, advisers and experts may be tempted to hide their doubts under the guise of irrational assertiveness when accompanied by the fear that uncertainty can be read as a lack of competence. The fear is risky and inconsistent with their expert and advising roles in the process of management. For example, we ask an expert or advisor to resolve the problem and get information about one course of action, when in fact, she or he knows several solutions. If the decision-makers have received information that the expert is not certain of a solution and that there are more possible solutions, they could consider other options of action, seek information from other sources etc., which would allow for making a better decision, and – most importantly – they would be better aware of the risks associated with taking this or that decision.

In some cases, information about risk is more important than solutions. Consultants can be employed in organizations not only to identify the best scenario of action, but also in order to determine the risk of solutions at stake. Therefore, rational informative assertion is an important skill of advisers and experts (Frenkel, Hommel, & Rudolf, 2004).

Excessive assertiveness of the adviser can be expected by the customer and justified in part by the function of motivation. This happens, for example, when the customers expect that the adviser will motivate them to make decisions or confirm the intentions pursued. Even in such a situation advisers are responsible for the mistakes of the customer resulting from their overconfidence. Thus, for example, theorists of business “couching” point to the fact that the role of the coach, inter

alia, is to raise the customer's concerns and skills to challenge the known and proven solutions so that they can find even better solutions (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2008; Ives & Cox, 2014).

9.4. Informative assertiveness of a seller

Even if the behaviour of the seller encourages the purchase, it may in some cases not be in the interest of the institution in charge of sales for the long term. This can happen when it has the hallmarks of an irrational informative assertion, which misleads the buyer. For example, irrational informative assertiveness might be a sales tactic involving understatement – an indicator of the benefits of the product and concealment of its defects, which can confuse the customer and lead to purchase decisions, which would not have been taken if the customer had had adequate knowledge. When the customers become the users of the product, they can discover its flaws. Then they may avoid repeat purchases where they were misled. In this case the above, assertiveness is not to the advantage of the seller and the organization that employs them, because it results in the loss of the company image and outflow of customers. It is effective, but in the short term. In the long term it is risky and, therefore, inefficient.

There are better ways of selling than the above tactic of understatement. Skills of rational informative assertiveness are required to encourage the customer to buy without using the above tactic than with its use. For example, one can ask the customer about the criteria the product has to meet, and then describe the product accordingly (indicate what advantages and disadvantages it has regarding these criteria), but skilfully – so that the customers well understand how the product can satisfy their needs (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2013, pp. 174–193).

9.5. Informative assertiveness of a negotiator

Irrational informative assertiveness may be an element of bluff and persuasion in negotiations. As such it can contribute to the success of a negotiator. For example, if the negotiator makes the impression that they are impeccable regarding the case they consider negotiable, they can provoke the other side of the negotiations to make concessions. Therefore, what above was called irrational informative assertion is a recognized negotiating tactic. Note, however, that this is a risky tactic and – in some cases – may be inefficient. It is risky especially in the case of long-term cooperation. When the other party realizes that it was misled, then the tactic can spoil the image of the negotiators and the organization represented by them and may lead to rupture of negotiations or hinder the establishment of talks in the future (Carson, 2010; Curry,

2008, pp. 150–173). The tactic may be too inefficient when it hinders the achievement of a satisfactory compromise. It may turn out to be like that, for example, when one of the objectives of the negotiations is to build trust between the parties, or at the final stage of negotiations when the strategy of cooperation is determined, when reliable mutual information plays a very important role for the development of accurate solutions (Bugdol, 2011; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991, pp. 50–55).

In the case of the discussion about the disagreement between the parties to the negotiations, methodologically rational informative assertiveness may facilitate agreement, as it allows dialogue in the context of justification (substantive negotiations). Accurate determination of reasons and arguments of the presented attitude lets the other side understand them well. Expressing confidence in the things that are known to be questionable may cause mistrust, because it is a typical manifestation of dishonesty. When justifying, negotiators can examine and discuss the merits of their positions, and in this area find compromise solutions for both sides. Irrational informative assertiveness can significantly reduce the possibility of negotiations in the context of justifications and thus increases the risk of unnecessary escalation of the conflict between the parties (Ury, 2007, 2011).

9.6. Informative assertiveness in motivating and organizing

The superior's commands can motivate the subordinates by his or her authority within the organization (resulting from the role they play in the organization). Besides this, the superior can motivate them by indicating the reasons of his or her decisions. In this case, the subordinate have a chance to submit to the instruction not only because it is their duty or fear, but also by recognizing the legitimacy of the instruction. Therefore, rational informative assertiveness plays the role of rational motivation, when the supervisor motivates the subordinates by their understanding of the reasons of his or her decision (Frey & Osterloh, 2001).

When issuing commands rational informative assertiveness can support efficiency of their execution when they specify their aim and probability of information. For example, a supervisor may issue a command to a subordinate in this way: "Please buy product X at company Y," or: "I have just received from source Z the information that product X has the best price in company Y, so please go there to buy it, but I'm not entirely sure of this information, so please check it first." The practical difference between the two messages is that the second message carries the information about the real purpose of the transaction. Its aim is to make a purchase at a good price (not make a purchase in company X). Imagine that in the meantime the price of product X has increased significantly in company Y and the employee becomes aware of it before making a purchase. After receiving the first command – they will make a purchase and expose their own organization to unnecessary costs.

In the second case, maybe before buying they will consult their supervisor and confirm the instruction. Then the employee and supervisor have a better guarantee of achieving the purpose (purchase at a good price).

Rational informative assertiveness can be a method of taking orders by subordinates, when it carries information about whether the command has been understood and whether they are able to fulfil it well. Exaggerated (irrational) informative assertiveness of an employee, even if it is a way to show respect for a colleague or superior, can be confusing and result in poor execution of the command. It is a fact that fashion for assertiveness sometimes is wrongly associated with overly confident confirmations, for example, in response to questions: “Are you sure?” “Do you understand it?” or “Can you do it?” Succumbing to this fashion of speech the employee does not make proper use of the opportunity to acquire additional instructions that would help them better perform the task or avoid mistakes. If, as a result, the command is not executed or not executed well – it can lead to losses and conflicts within the organization.

Conclusions

The chapter specifies the difference between rational and irrational informative assertiveness and their nature. It indicates the role of rational informative assertiveness and the risk posed by irrational informative assertiveness in management. The analyses show some reasons to shape rational informative assertiveness in managers and other members of organisations.

The study opens some perspectives of further empirical and theoretical research. It formulates hypotheses that can be empirically investigated. The hypotheses can be specified in various ways and lead to further investigations. For example, one can experimentally investigate the impact of rational and irrational assertiveness in communication between organisations on the possibility of building stable alliances and cooperation between the organisations in specific areas, the impact of rational and irrational informative assertiveness of the members of an organisation on its functional and existential security. The distinction between rational and irrational informative assertiveness can be useful in the analysis of management processes in contexts and cases other than those indicated in this study. For example, there takes place a wide spread discussion in management ethics on the problem of admissibility of manipulation in management. The study outlines some mental mechanisms of and risks essentially linked to irrational informative assertiveness. In this way the chapter shows some pragmatic limits of appropriability of manipulation in management. These are only examples of empirical and theoretical research perspectives indicated by the supplementation of management communication theories with the distinction between rational and irrational assertiveness, which is presented in this chapter.

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